

eHouseCall

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A Monthly Electronic Newsletter from HealthLink

Doctor's Bag



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Why you should get to know your pharmacist.

Your family doctor is an excellent resource for information about the proper use of medications. However, don't underestimate the value of a relationship with your pharmacist. Pharmacists can provide important information about medications, including:

- Interactions between prescription and over-the-counter drugs, supplements, foods and alcohol
- Side effects and what you can do to avoid or lessen them
- What to do if you miss a dose or accidentally take an extra dose
- Storage of medications, including information about expiration and proper disposal
- Proper use/application of inhalers, skin patches, drops and other non-pill medications
- General advice about over-the-counter medications, vitamins and dietary supplements

According to the American Pharmacists Association (APhA), individuals who know their pharmacists by name are generally better informed about their medications. That's the good news.

A 2007 survey commissioned by the APhA found that only 19 percent of consumers said they are on a first-name basis with their pharmacists compared to 49 percent with their doctor and 46 percent with their dentist.

According to the same survey, 53 percent of consumers stated they are on a first-name basis with their hair dressers.

Time to put our priorities in order.

HLInfo YOUR MONTHLY GUIDE TO HEALTH CARE AWARENESS

APRIL

Storing Medicine Safely

Despite the fact that medicine cabinets are most often found in the bathroom, this location is not appropriate for many drugs. Before you store any prescription or over-the-counter medication, be sure to read the patient information that accompanies the drug. If you are advised to keep the medicine in a cool, dry place, don't store it in the bathroom.



"The heat and humidity from showers and baths can cause medications to break down, lose potency, and, in rare cases, even become toxic," according to the Johns Hopkins Medicine Health Alert, 'Ask the Doctor about your Prescriptions.'

"To keep your medications in the best condition, keep them in a dry area away from heat and light, such as a dresser

drawer. Kitchen cabinets are also a good choice, as long as they aren't next to the stove, sink or dishwasher. Wherever you keep your medications, make sure that bottles are tightly sealed after use."

As always, keep all medications out of the reach of children.

When to Discard Medicines

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires the listing of expiration dates on prescriptions and over-the-counter medications. The FDA defines *expiration date* as "the date for a drug estimated for its shelf life with proper storage in sealed containers away from harmful and variable factors like heat and humidity."

Medications that have been stored under good conditions should retain their effectiveness at least up to the expiration date. The Johns Hopkins Health Alert suggests discarding "any pills that have become discolored, turned powdery or smell strong; any liquids that appear cloudy or filmy; or any tubes of cream that are hardened or cracked ... Also, don't mix medications in one container; chemicals from different medications can interact to interfere with potency or cause harmful side effects. If two or more medications have been mingled for any period of time, discard them."

The FDA recently approved two-year extensions on expiration dates for a number of medications, including some widely used antibiotics, antiulcer/antireflux drugs and tranquilizers. Check with your doctor or pharmacist for specifics – and always seek advice from a health care professional if you have questions or need information about your medicines.

DidUKnow?

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Environmental Protection Agency publish the following guidelines for the proper disposal of prescription drugs:

- ♦ Take unused, unneeded or expired prescription drugs out of their original containers.
- ♦ Mix the prescription drugs with an undesirable substance, like used coffee grounds or kitty litter, and put them in impermeable, non-descript containers, such as empty cans or sealable bags, further ensuring that the drugs are not diverted or accidentally ingested by children or pets.
- ♦ Throw these containers in the trash.
- ♦ Flush prescription drugs down the toilet only if the accompanying patient information specifically instructs it is safe to do so.
- ♦ Return unused, unneeded or expired prescription drugs to pharmaceutical take-back locations that allow the public to bring unused drugs to a central location for safe disposal."

Ask your pharmacist about take-back locations in your area or visit www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov for more information.

Information Sources

Know Your Medication – Know Your Pharmacist Survey, 2007 - American Pharmacists Association, Washington, D.C.

Johns Hopkins Medicine HEALTH ALERTS, "Ask the Doctor About Your Prescriptions," March 6, 2007; "Your Pharmacist – An Underutilized Resource," July 31, 2007

Office of National Drug Control Policy, "Proper Disposal of Prescription Drugs," February 2007.

MedlinePlus, A service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, "Medical Encyclopedia: Storing Medicine Safely," May 2007

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